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Now It Comes Out

EVER SO slowly, the curtain is parting on the baffling attack by Israeli forces on the U.S. communications vessel Liberty last June 8 that killed 34 Americans and wounded 75 more. Israel apologized for the attack and a State Department press officer has stated, "So far as the official posture of the (U.S.) Government is concerned, we've accepted the Israeli apology, and consider the incident a mistake."

That explains nothing.

What was the Liberty doing there in the first place, only 12 miles off shore when we knew full well that a shooting war was raging in the Sinai Peninsula and environs? That has never been adequately explained by our Government. Shortly after the attack occurred, Phil Goulding, assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, could say only that he could not find any plausible explanation for it.

Now some of the curious circumstances surrounding the Liberty's tragic encounter are coming to the surface. The Liberty is actually a technical research ship loaded with sophisticated electronic gear and computerized instruments. It is what some would call a "spy ship," and according to one source, was under control of the Central Intelligence Agency. A report by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency five days after the attack quoted high-ranking naval officers as saying that the 6th Fleet could not assure the Israelis of the Liberty's whereabouts because it was under control of "U.S. intelligence."

Another version is that the Liberty was under control of the super-secret National Security Agency, our communications intelligence and code-cracking arm. The fact that an NSA civilian employee was among the casualties on the Liberty suggests that may be a strong possibility. And a confidential memo just issued by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith says that the "navy had informed President Johnson that if the ship were under 6th Fleet command instead of the CIA, it would not have been exposed—through a conflict in American policy—to conditions contributing to Israel's tragic error."

The sources of these interesting reports are, of course, Israeli-oriented. That, however, does not make them any less reliable; and the fact that our Government, State Department, and Pentagon have said so little about why the Liberty was where it was June 8, or why an order from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to retreat farther from shore was never received, and cling to the response that an apology was offered and accepted, suggests that there may

be more to the voyage of the Liberty than we yet know.

Until the facts come out on this mysterious incident in the brief war in the Middle East, perhaps any final condemnation of Israel had best be deferred. If there was any heavy-handed CIA involvement in the affair, the tight-lipped discreetness with which the event is now discussed in Washington is understandable.